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ABSTRACT

Drastic social problems challenge teachers looking to increase parental involvement in schools. Traditional strategies to involve parents, such as inviting parents to meetings and school events, do not promote genuine interaction between home and school. Instead, they separate parents and teachers. Two-way communication between home and school is essential to building successful parent-teacher partnerships. Ways to increase this communication include: (1) informal, social meetings with parents; (2) frequent, positive phone calls; (3) newsletters which elicit parental feedback; and (4) home visits. Two-way communication provides choices to parents as to the times and ways they can be involved in their children's education. (JW)

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Strengthening Partnerships by Reaching Out to Families

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Teachers face many challenges calling for changes that affect life in their classrooms. Among these mandated changes is the goal that; "By the year 2,000 every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (Goals 2000: Educate America Act). Each individual school district will work on a plan to meet this goal, but ultimately the challenge of initiating and nurturing a positive home/school relationship rests primarily with the classroom teacher.

Some teachers may feel they want to close their classroom door and return to a time when life was simpler, familiar, certain and predictable.....a time when parents were responsible for their children at home and teachers took over in school. Certainly one can empathize with this feeling as the demand for change seems to approach us these days at warp speed! But, we must ask ourselves why creating stronger home/school partnerships has become so essential for teachers, children, and their families?

Marital instability, an increase in unmarried mothers, poverty, changes in role behavior for both men and women,

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mobility and urbanization, and increased rate of social change are some of the characteristics of present day American life that have influenced the changing nature of today's families (Gestwicki, 1992). These social changes, affecting the nature of families, have presented a challenge to teachers in their work toward increasing parent involvement. (Powell, 1989).

1. Parents are increasingly unlikely to be available for traditional modes of parent participation in school activities.
2. The content of many elementary school classrooms may assume a level of quality in children's family-based socialization experiences that may not be provided by a growing number of families at all economic levels.
3. Educators are called upon to develop appropriate responses to families from cultural and linguistic minority backgrounds.

Traditional strategies, such as inviting parents to attend school plays, requesting baked goods for class parties, meeting families only at open house or parent conferences, are examples of ritualized formal traditions of parent involvement that do not promote genuine interaction or enhance authentic communication between home and school (Swap, 1993). These traditional forms of parent involvement kept a "comfortable distance" between the home and school, kept the roles of parent and teacher separate, and always relied on the family to come into the school.

Teachers today, who attempt to improve home/school relationships and increase contact with families by relying on parent involvement strategies from the 1950's, may find themselves frustrated and failing to increase participation or parent involvement significantly.

What strategies can teachers use to develop partnerships with the families represented in the diversity of their classrooms?

A key component to building successful partnerships with families is an increased emphasis on two-way communication. Traditionally, schools send out informational notices or requests to parents who are then expected to read and take the appropriate action. Schools usually assume parental support for their requests and expectations and rarely ask parents to express their opinion or reaction.

A partnership approach differs from the former by planning opportunities for more genuine interaction between families and schools. Teachers might plan informal meetings with families (such as an individual classroom "open house evening"), arrange social gatherings (pot-luck family supper night), make frequent "positive" phone calls, create video tapes of events in the classroom, and design newsletters that ask for parental input or feedback. This increased emphasis on two-way communication allows a teacher to share more information about the children in daily school life, the classroom curriculum, and about themselves as genuine people in a more realistic and authentic context.

In turn, parents may feel they can share their personal needs and strengths, and express their expectations for their child in the home and at school. With increased contact and communication, if a question or problem does occur, both the parent and teacher have had the opportunity to establish a positive framework for communicating which will help facilitate cooperative problem solving in the face of a crisis or concern.

Home visits provide another way of reaching out to busy families and establishing a connection with parents on their "home-turf". Home visits have been recognized and supported as a way to reach families who have special needs or as a way to "teach" parents and children in an informal setting. They have been used by many Kindergarten teachers as a way of easing the transition from home to school for younger children (Barnett, M. & Meyer, T., 1993).

Home visits have been overlooked for their potential to help teachers establish genuine connections and learn more about a familiy's culture. The powerful experience of observing and interacting with a family in their home environment informs a teacher first-hand. The teacher can then support and help a child "voice" those family differences in conversations with peers and through planned activities in the curriculum.

One teacher in a third grade classroom, after discussing the idea with her families, began joining them for dinner. These informal evenings helped her meet the

original goal of learning more about the cultural diversity in her classroom. Additionally, she gained remarkable insight into each student's unique behaviors and characteristics when given the opportunity to observe them in the context of their family and the community (Nathan, 1995).

Building authentic partnerships between home and school, while continuing to incorporate some of the traditional methods of involving parents, finds new and multiple ways to reach out to families (Swap). Increased two-way communication enhances the likelihood that interactions will be positive, personal and more informative for both parents and teachers. Choices are given to families as to the times and ways they can become involved in their child's education. Teachers are flexible and respectful of each family's unique way of being. Parent involvement is not defined or limited to families coming to school.

True partnerships often begin to emerge when schools and teachers are the first to reach out to families. When schools approach families not with the agenda of; "Here is what we want you to do for us", but for the purpose of finding out more about the family's strengths and needs, the family's goals and expectations, the family's dreams for their child, then partnerships are formed. Schools and families can develop trust in the "process" of changing to a partnership approach that involves parents, teachers, and children in genuine educational change.

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